

Drug control bureaucrat: Illegal drug use by teens is declining

by CNS

John P. Walters, director, Office of National Drug Control Policy, was nominated by President Bush in 2001 and was confirmed by the Senate. He previously served as the ONDCP's first chief of staff in 1989-1993 and held posts at the Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Since 2001, federal statistics show significant declines in drug use by young people. Walters was interviewed by members of The San Diego Union-Tribune's editorial board. This is an edited transcript of the interview.

Q: You're here in San Diego to announce a new counternarcotics strategy for the U.S-Mexico border. Give us a brief overview of this new strategy.

A: Sure. The effort was to take the initiative on our side of the border - federal, state and local law enforcement and a lot of dynamic movement in terms of expanding security at the border, especially on the federal side, but even state and local task forces and other things. Take those various efforts and try to create a structure that allows them to work better together. A lot of it is sharing information, intelligence collection. There are parts of it that are focused on the ports of entry. Other parts are focused between the ports of entry. There's a separate section focused on air movements. Investigations and prosecutions, money and cooperation with Mexico. Seven major parts. There are 68 objectives, 52 of them roughly are under way or completed. The others will be. The goal is to provide a framework for the actions of individual agencies to be coordinated in a flexible way and in a way they can adapt because obviously a lot of the threats we're looking at are those that have used their mobility, their ability to hide, their ability to change to try to evade enforcement pressure both by us and by the Mexican government.

Q: What's really new about this? Because looking at this list, one would assume that a lot of these things the government has been doing for years.

A: Yes, I think the reason this came about was we have been putting more and more resources. I think what's happened in the last five years, I would say, is I think there's a consensus in the country to get control of the Southwest border. We're not there yet and we are still putting resources in. A lot of those are federal resources in terms of hiring personnel on a large scale, technology, other kinds of infrastructure. Also, to expand the partnerships that we've had with state and local law enforcement for drug enforcement as well as other terror threats and homeland security threats.

Q: In terms of timeliness, there is a pending agreement between the United States and Mexico on some greatly enhanced cooperation and assistance to Mexico in fighting the drug cartels in Mexico. Can you tell us how close the Bush administration is to an agreement with Mexico on that and what's going to be in that package?

A: We're pretty close to agreements, as you know from other press reports. We have been working with

(Mexican) President Calderon for a number of months. The two presidents spoke a number of months ago. And then again in Canada when they met. And we have been working with Mexican officials both in Washington and in Mexico City to look at ways in which we can further help the Mexican government and create a partnership that will have even more far-reaching effect.

Q: I was going to ask you about the evidence that cocaine is in shorter supply on the streets of the United States than it's been in some time.

A: We've now seen multiple indicators. We first started getting this from law enforcement investigations; wire taps, informants, saying that people are having trouble moving kilo quantities at wholesale level. They can't get it. They can't get it at this price. Price is going up substantially. It started in March. It's now spread to 37 cities. And in addition to that information we have had several weeks ago, Qwest Diagnostics, the largest workplace drug-testing firm, released its data showing that workplace positives have dropped dramatically the second quarter of this year.

Q: I saw a figure somewhere that Mexico has cut its own importation of the precursor chemicals for methamphetamine by 80 percent-plus?

A: Yes, they have reduced the importation of pseudoephedrine from 216 metric tons in 2004, legitimate importation, to 45 metric tons in 2006. Thus far they've only imported 12 metric tons. They have announced that in 2008 they will stop all imports of pseudoephedrine and by the beginning of 2009 they will stop all over-the-counter selling of combination products containing pseudoephedrines. So they are going after the precursor (chemicals) extremely aggressively, and we are beginning to see some signs that that's making methamphetamine in the United States less available.

Q: And has there been a commensurate increase in resources for demand reduction, treatment, education?

A: That's a good point. We have done a couple of things in that regard. One, we've gone after, as I think most people who look at this want you to, where this starts in the United States and that's with teenagers and adolescents. We've had a decline of 23 percent in the last five years in teen drug use. That's overall. Marijuana's down 25 percent. Some of the lesser-used but dangerous drugs like meth, down 50 percent. Ecstasy down over 50 percent. Alcohol and cigarette smoking have also been down; cigarettes down 29 percent for teens and alcohol down 13 percent. We've done that through prevention efforts. We have also expanded treatment. California is one of the new grantees for the president's Access to Recovery Program.

Q: If you look at any reasonable compilation of statistics, alcohol is far more likely to lead to death, suicides, car crashes, drownings, crimes of violence. It is far more likely to lead to hospital visits than anything else. Alcohol kills far more people than all other drugs combined. At a basic level, how do we get around the fact that we have a national drug policy that focuses on illegal drugs and morally describes them as an abomination

and something that must not be accepted, while tolerating as a legal drug something that is vastly more damaging?

A: The argument you raise, of course, could be used as an argument for why don't we have prohibition. And the answer to that is we did and the country decided it didn't want to continue prohibition. But I would not deny that alcohol is a destructive substance. I do think that if you could do something about something that's dangerous, even if you can't do something about all things that are dangerous, you ought to do that. Especially if it affects young people.

Q: Would it be your assertion that illegal drugs do more damage to the United States than alcohol use?

A: I think the danger that is demonstrable with the use and addiction from illegal drugs and the behaviors that they cause warrant the prohibition that we now have.

Q: What progress is being made by Mexico and by the United States, working together, against the major drug cartels inside Mexico?

A: I think the biggest steps you've seen recently is first the extradition of major traffickers that were in Mexican custody at the end of this year. Calderon did that. It had not been done before. This has been a huge step and obviously helped us get people who have harmed Americans, and helps them bring these people to justice when their institutions and justice have been attacked. It's a sensitive matter for our country to extradite its citizens for trial in another jurisdiction. We know that and we're trying to do this in a way that makes it possibly politically to continue this in both countries. Secondly, they have deployed both military and police forces as never before in key parts of the country. They have had a long period - we've summarized some of the data - of eradicating opium poppy, which has been growing there, and cannabis, which has been growing there, as well as doing some enforcement.

Q: And they've had a lot of success doing that.

A: They've kept the rates of eradication quite dramatic, yes. But the other thing that they've done most recently that I think has contributed to what we see with shortages of cocaine is deploy these forces in key mobility corridors north to south along the highway system and to rotate them so that the opportunities for corruption become less. That they're rotating both army and police units together so that essentially you can't be sure that the guy who's going to be there tomorrow is the guy who's there today so you can intimidate him or bribe him. They have a moving force. They're also trying to create vetted units. They are working with us with intelligence. They are trying to work on attacking the cash flow back. We've been good enough (against) money laundering that a lot of the money that goes into Mexico is in the form of cash that has to be smuggled back. They would like help targeting that. We're working with them on that. We're also working with them on targeting guns. They ask us to stop the dollars, stop the weapons that are killing (their) security forces that are

coming from the United States. We're helping them also in sharing investigative leads and getting it back so we can find the sources of these weapons. And finally, I would say that what we're doing is for the first time there are groups that control the border. Basically, the groups that are a threat to us are criminal groups and so-called gatekeeper groups that control the so-called plazas, the key points of entry.

Q: Like the Arellano Felix organization in Tijuana?

A: Absolutely. The people on both sides of the border who've helped them hide, facilitate, corrupt, tunnel, other kinds of things. They taxed the drugs, they taxed the guns, the money in trafficking human beings. These are the key facilitators at the border. We have created a combined intelligence picture of who those groups are, who's in them and we're sharing them with the Mexicans. We're going to take those groups apart in the next six months more aggressively.

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